Christian Warren Freed
Curse
of the
Witch Queen:
A War Priests of Andrak Saga

THE CURSE OF THE WITCH QUEEN

A War Priests of Andrak Saga

Christian Warren Freed

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For the men and women everywhere who put their lives on the line in the defense of others.

I.

Brother Quinlan looked across to his young squire with a stern glare. Donal Sawq grew to become a bright young man, one of the brightest Quinlan had encountered during his tenure as a war priest, but he wasn't ready for the assignment the Lord General Rosca assigned them. The world had grown colder, suddenly more nightmare than hope. Increased assaults by the Omegri depleted resources faster than Castle Andrak could collect them. The heavy numbers of slain knights further worried Quinlan. He'd always felt his place was atop the walls, defending the world from evil. Being sent on various missions of, what he deemed, minimal importance was beneath a war priest. Still, Quinlan wasn't one to disobey orders.

It was that adherence to rules that saw him still alive. He'd been assigned to Castle Bendris and was away on assignment when it was overrun by the Great Enemy. Fortune had both cursed and smiled upon him that night. He reached up to his armor, absently brushing where the burn marks scarred his chest. Dark memories continued to haunt him years after that fateful event. He struggled to push it back into the forgotten recesses of his mind. The war against the Great Enemy demanded his full attention. Unfortunately, that effort had sent him away from the battle scarred walls of Castle Andrak and deep into the Free Lands.

Donal Sawq harbored no hesitations. Barely twenty, the youth had already seen and done more than the vast majority of his peers. He'd come to the castle two seasons ago as an inexperienced squire to a lowly knight. Donal watched Sir Forlei fall and immediately took his place along the ramparts to help drive back the Omegri. Not only did he survive the hundred day tour of duty atop the walls, Lord General Rosca offered him a place as one of the war priests. The honor was more than he ever hoped to achieve in his life. He wore the silver and blue robes of a squire-initiate and served Brother Quinlan faithfully, dutifully. The wonder in his eyes with each new adventure and ordeal never failed to amaze Quinlan. He found hope in Donal and secretly prayed for even a small measure of that youthful exuberance to wear off on his tired shoulders.

"We should be reaching Mistwell soon," Quinlan said with almost casual disinterest.

Donal nodded in agreement, accepting his master's knowledge in this area. They were five days out of Castle Andrak. Lord General Rosca insisted on extreme haste. The pair had to reach the floating city of Mistwell before the envoy from Tolchas departed. Quinlan had two days and ten leagues left. Plenty of time for one of the vaunted war priests of Andrak.

Noticing the silence drifting between them, Quinlan added, "Have you ever been?"

"Once, when Sir Forlei and I were answering the call to stand the wall. It is…an amazing place," Donal replied.

He quickly fell silent. Quinlan's eyes fell upon him, casually studying his young squire. Watching his mentor die inches away from him had proven traumatic on many levels, much the same as hundreds of previous squires attending the walls of Castle Andrak. Donal survived the hundred days, experiencing numerous horrors along the way, and was left with more doubts than anything else. In the time since Quinlan learned much of young Donal. His childhood dreams revolved around becoming a great hero sung about in taverns and bars across the Free Lands. The reality was far grimmer. He knew now that there were no heroes, not really. Heroes were the ones taken off the wall and given a proper burial for their deeds. Donal wasn't sure if he wanted to be a war priest any longer. The solitary, short lived tenure deprived them of a meaningful existence. He wanted more, but had already sworn the oath of station.

Quinlan observed his squire's internal debate and decided not to intervene. Some matters in life could only be dealt with alone. He only prayed Donal defeated whatever demons he struggled with before reaching their goal.

II.

They followed the winding trail up the side of the blue stone cliffs, twisting around and up until cold breath blew in tiny clouds. Quinlan wrapped his thick, blue cloak tighter around his shoulders. He didn't remember the last time he'd made this journey. War priests seldom found reason or opportunity to leave the castle. Now that he had both, he suddenly found the urge to return to the walls and take his rightful place among the

one hundred almost overpowering. Frowning, the war priest continued the climb.

Their efforts were rewarded when the trail emerged into a massive cavern dug into the mountainside. The domed ceiling stretched nearly a hundred meters, exposing the true depth. Watch fires and torches lit the walls and vaulted ceiling. Scores of men and women moved about. Most were merchants and businessmen. A small platoon of fifty men, dressed in the boiled leather armor and colors of the Mistwell militia armed with short swords and half spears maintained order in the cavern while merchants stored their goods and horses. All commerce in Mistwell was performed in the large marketplace the commerce guild established generations ago in the rear of the cavern. Quinlan had no business with merchants. His task was far more severe.

The war priest slid from his saddle and handed the reins to Donal with instructions to stable and feed them. Donal obeyed unquestioningly as any worthy squire would though his youthful eyes couldn't help but wander over this new wonder. Mistwell was always seen from a distance, ever just out of reach. Quinlan left Donal brushing down the horses and storing their tack. The sounds of a dozen different languages being spoken at once assaulted his hearing while his stomach grumbled as the scent of roasting meat and fowl wafted under his nose. The experience ended far too quickly for his liking but he had a higher duty to perform. He took his place beside Brother Quinlan at the cavern mouth.

"Mistwell can be both wondrous and dangerous, young Donal. Best to be wary up here in the clouds. Not everyone respects the blue and silver of the war priests, especially when they think they can get away with it," Quinlan cautioned with a low voice.

Donal swallowed the small lump forming in his throat and nodded meekly. "Yes, Brother. Are you expecting trouble?"

Quinlan regarded his young squire momentarily before breaking into a grin. "When can a war priest not? Come, we must see the Administrator. Time is of the essence."

They marched towards the narrow bridge spanning the chasm between the mountains and the first in a series of floating islands that comprised Mistwell. Donal looked down, against his better judgment and saw only clouds with the faintest specks of verdant greens far, far below.

The bridge itself must have been hundreds of years old, or so he thought. Quinlan futilely insisted the local engineers inspected the hundreds of bridges connecting Mistwell daily. That didn't take away from the fact that the bridge looked entirely unstable to the young squire.

People stepped aside as the war priest and his squire stepped onto the bridge. Respect for the blue and silver was universal throughout the Free Lands. While evil lurked in every corner of the world and brave men and women constantly protected the innocent, the war priests kept the ancient Omegri at bay. Even the lowest of the order garnered respect. Quinlan ignored them. Focused on his task, he strode confidently onto the bridge, Donal in tow. The squire moved with decidedly less confidence. Quinlan grinned as he listened to Donal whisper a short prayer as the bridge rocked gently beneath his boots.

III.

Mistwell was established as an impossible dream. The visionary engineers who built the floating city that stretched between several islands in the sky took the project on a dare from jealous kings. No one could have predicted the results. Mistwell grew slowly and became a haven for those without kingdoms, the orphaned and forgotten. It was the last, most successful free trade city in the Free Lands. Thousands called the islands in the sky home as they scoured away the taint of their old lives to become something more.

Donal was in sensory overload. He'd read about the city, but words were pale comparison to what he saw. Domed houses lined the green covered hills in orderly rows. Painted every conceivable color, they stretched from ground level to high into the clouds. Dogs and cats and a few lizards roamed the slopes, darting in and out of shrubs and bushes. The roads were faded, copper cobblestone. Wildflowers lined the main avenue, further beautifying the city.

The Administrator's Hall was one of the oldest structures in Mistwell. Alabaster walls stretched up three stories and were capped with red arches. Marble steps were added long after the creation but added elegance lost in many other places. There were no guards for Mistwell was neutral. Quinlan and Donal marched up the stairs and into the massive

green entrance door. Gold painted sconces lined the walls, each burning with oil lamps. So enlightened, not a single shadow could be found within.

Glass chandeliers hung from the domed ceiling, reflecting the sunlight pouring in through meticulously clear windows. The war priest bathed in the heat and light, momentarily forgetting his concerns. Attendants in the black and gold livery of the city went back and forth about their business, hardly bothering to look Quinlan's way. He found their indifference mildly disturbing. Brother Quinlan was about to flag one down when a slender man approached.

Dressed in shades of blue, he wore a flowing cape and tapered boots. Jet black hair clung to the sides of his face, accenting the darkness of his eyebrows. Quinlan suppressed a frown when he noticed the man wearing makeup. He bowed with unnecessary flourish and said, "Welcome, war priest. It is an honor to have one of your hallowed order in Mistwell. Administrator Kohl will see you in her private study."

Quinlan listened to his effeminate voice and wondered if the man was a eunuch. While not popular for a long time, some kings continued to use eunuchs. That this man might have escaped or been set free wasn't much of a stretch.

Quinlan nodded curtly. "Thank you. It is my understanding that time is of the utmost."

Something flickered in the man's eyes, gone almost instantly. "Naturally, Brother. This way, if you please."

They followed the strange man in blue through the winding corridors until they stood within an austere room of pure white. A small desk with rounded corners, crafted from the rich cherry tree sat in the middle with a handful of random papers on top. A clear vase filled with red roses sat on a marble pedestal beneath the window. Aside from that the room was empty. Quinlan had never seen the like.

"Brother Quinlan, what an honor it is to have you in Mistwell," called a melodious voice from behind.

Quinlan and Donal turned to see a short woman in her late fifties gracefully approaching. Her dress of dark purple dragged lightly across the floor. Lines aged her face and gray hairs were more abundant that her

natural blond but her eyes remained sharp. Their light blue contrasted with the darkness of her clothes.

Quinlan offered a bow. “Administrator Kohl, the honor is ours. How may we be of assistance?”

She stiffened briefly, his urgency taking her momentarily off guard. “Please, call me Yavina. I am too old to stand on rigid formality.” Gliding to her desk, Yavina sat and pursed her lips. “I want you to know that I didn’t intend on getting the war priests involved, but certain matters forced me to contact Lord General Rosca. Recently an emissary from Tolchas arrived stating the firstborn son of the king has been kidnapped. Prince Armas is heir to throne, barely ten years old.”

Quinlan readied to speak but Yavina cut him off. “Armas is not the only one. Several other nobles have experienced the same nightmare. All firstborn sons no less. While I am no fool to superstition I find this trend unsettling. Our world is dangerous enough without thieves in the night.”

“You believe these abductions are related?” Quinlan asked. Tolchas was far to the northeast, almost at the edge of the known world but still powerful enough to broker massive favor in the higher courts of the Free Lands. If anything happened to Armas there could be war.

She nodded. “I do and there is only one person in the Free Lands capable of committing such foul deeds.”

“The Witch Queen,” Quinlan all but whispered.

Yavina frowned slightly. The corners of her thin lips drew downward. “Indeed. There are enough rumors of the F’telk moving across the lands to provide truth. The question is why.”

Quinlan ran his tongue across his upper teeth. “The Witch Queen hasn’t been a problem for a long time, prompting many to believe she is dead. How can she have ensorcelled the F’telk into serving her?”

“Those flesh stealing demons serve many masters, Brother Quinlan,” she replied tersely.

Quinlan mused silently for a while. “She could be making her play for power. It’s been long enough since the last time that many in the Free Lands have already forgotten the horrors she visited upon us.”

“If she is indeed the one responsible that is possible,” the administrator of Mistwell reluctantly admitted. Her slight hesitation in

replying told Quinlan she knew more than she was letting on. “You are to travel to Calad Reach and discover the truth of the missing children. In return Mistwell will donate new weapons and supplies to castle Andrak for the next calendar year at no cost. Your Lord General found this deal adequate, which is why you’ve been dispatched.”

“What if there are no children in Calad Reach?” Quinlan asked. He didn’t approve of wasting a war priest and his squire on such an inconsequential mission, but the Lord General issued the orders.

“I don’t deal in what if’s, Brother Quinlan. Find the children and bring them home,” she said, her tone dismissive.

Quinlan and Donal bowed again and backed out of the odd, white chamber.

IV.

They rode north toward the edge of the Free Lands where the Witch Queen dwelled. Past thick forests and rich, rolling hills of open fields, priest and squire went. They stopped at streams and camped along the Porde River at sundown. Conversation slowed before fading almost entirely. Calad Reach was one of the few places in the world no one wanted to get to and Quinlan was leading them with minimal information. If the Witch Queen existed she wouldn’t take kindly to their intrusion.

Days fled at an alarming pace. The rushing waters from the Porde River echoed up the Indolense Permital, a half mile deep gorge that stretched and turned up the land for leagues. Donal suppressed the shivers the sounds produced. He’d never heard anything so angry before and, truthfully, didn’t want to again. Calad Reach sat nestled in the dark, black rock of the Bloodstone Mountains at the end of the Permital. Donal guessed another few days and they’d arrive. He found difficulty sleeping and jumped at strange sounds when he stood watch. The wilds of the Free Lands were no place for civilized people.

Donal’s head snapped back. His eyes flew wide, scanning the night. His hands dropped to his sword. Violent red eyes suddenly appeared at the edge of the clearing. They bore holes in Donal, reminding him of old fears and fresh doubts. His breathing quickened. His heart threatened to burst. Tears poured from his eyes. He opened his mouth, desperate to raise the

alarm but no words came. His hand fell away from his sword as the eyes inched closer.

Try as he might, Donal couldn't move. Paralyzed in place as whatever creature stalking him readied for the kill. A wretched stench assailed his senses. He vomited. Tendrils of darkness stretched out to curl around his ankles. He felt squeezed. Cold. Precious life bled through his flesh into the shadows. Resigned to death, Donal tried to close his eyes.

The rush of heat went past his head before he heard the loud screech and small explosion. Donal looked up to see fragments of a burning brand fall to the ground. In that brief instant he spied an elongated snout with fangs and the leathery curtain of wings as the beast screamed.

"Away foul demon!" Quinlan roared as he charged in with sword drawn.

The war priest exercised well-drilled precision as he cut and slashed at the mysterious beast trying to kill his squire. Donal had only been a squire for a few short months after surviving his one hundred days on the wall, but remained impressed with the tactical brilliance of a fully vested war priest. Quinlan didn't disappoint. He moved almost quicker than the naked eye could follow. It was over too soon. The beast dissolved back into the night, fleeing the clearing while it still clung to life.

Released from the strange power, Donal collapsed in a boneless heap. Quinlan sheathed his sword and knelt beside his squire. He checked the youth over for signs of physical injury, pausing only when he didn't find any marks other than the strange burn marks circling Donal's ankles.

"You will recover," he said shortly.

"The poison will kill him before dawn," a woman's voice replied.

Quinlan froze. He wasn't prepared for another attack. Not so soon. "Show yourself."

"Relax, war priest. I am not the one you need to worry about." Shimmering light glowed above the water, coalescing into the figure of a young woman dressed in diaphanous robes. Her golden hair flowed down past her shoulders, accenting her pleasant smile and playful eyes. Slender, she almost glided across the soft grass to where the war priest knelt.

Quinlan drew a sharp breath, nearly backing away. He'd heard legends but never imagined seeing an actual siren.

She saw his look and laughed. The golden song cascaded through the valley in the most beautiful song. “I am no ghost, Quinlan of Andrak.”

“How do you know me?” he asked defensively.

“I know many things. The wind whispers all secrets. It only takes one to listen to learn all matters in the world,” she replied. “My name is Songbird, and I can heal your friend if you allow it.”

Quinlan acquiesced and watched as she knelt beside Donal. Songbird glanced back at the pensive war priest. “There are many forms of magic in the world. Your squire encountered a wraith. A very potent wraith intent on consuming his life essence. It is fortunate I was nearby.”

“Fortune is often a matter of opinion,” he replied. “How do I know you weren’t lying in wait? It wouldn’t be the first time travelers were taken unaware on the road.”

Songbird fixed him with a steady glare. Wild lights reflected in her purple eyes. “If I wanted you dead you would never have known. Now be quiet and let me do my work.”

Quinlan resigned to watching her apply her lithe hands to Donal’s ankles. The squire gasped once and passed out. Quinlan peered closely as white-blue magic infused under the wounded flesh. Any taint of darkness slowly faded. Songbird stretched and rubbed her hands together. She gave Donal a reassuring pat on his head and turned back to Quinlan. “Now, let’s talk.”

V.

Sunlight bathed him, gently caressing his tired flesh with a mother’s tenderness. Donal smiled as his eyes fluttered open. All thoughts of the darkness from the night prior evaporated like morning mist. He attempted to rise, eager to learn what had happened once the nightmare beast retreated back into the night. Lost in a strange place, Quinlan’s eyes hurriedly scanned the area. He couldn’t find Quinlan. Hands reached for his weapon. His heart steadily thumped faster, deeper. Old nerves returned, reminding him of seeing his former master slain atop Castle Andrak’s walls.

“Brother Quinlan!” he all but squawked.

“He is down at the water edge filling the canteens. I am Songbird. I healed you from the wraith,” she told him.

Donal glanced right and found the most beautiful woman sitting cross-legged on a large tree stump. Her smile filled his heart with profound joy. All he could think to say was a humble, “Uh, thank you.”

Songbird laughed and the world joined in. Birds of every color filtered down through the trees to land on or around her. She laughed again, holding out her hands for cardinals and blue jays to perch.

Quinlan came back into their camp already in armor. The look in his eyes left little doubt in Donal’s mind he was more than eager to continue their journey. Calad Reach wasn’t far away. That meant the Witch Queen might already be waiting.

“Are you well enough to travel?” he asked.

Donal propped up on his elbows. “Yes sir. I’ll pack the horses.”

Quinlan shook his head. “No. I’ve already finished. There is fresh cooked stream trout in the fire and a few wild roots Songbird brought us. Eat and recover your strength. We need to leave soon.”

Lacking most of his strength, Donal glanced back at the mysterious woman calling herself Songbird and slumped to the ground. Questions swirled around the emptiness in his mind, but he was too emotionally exhausted to form them coherently. The young squire was still looking on her shapely figure when darkness reclaimed him.

VI.

The path to Calad Reach grew increasingly more treacherous the nearer they got. Consequentially their mood darkened with each passing league. The War Priest and his squire spoke less. Their minds were lost on rumors of great evil. Quinlan wore a brooding look as Songbird explained a great deal as they rode. Lord General Rosca contracted her to guide Brother Quinlan to the lair of the Witch Queen, but she would go no further than the border. Vile things were said to take place within the Reach and the siren would have no part in it. Quinlan didn’t begrudge that tiny mercy, though it left him questioning whether he possessed the stamina to deal with whatever horrors lay ahead.

Quinlan was impressed with Donal’s recovery. Songbird’s magic infused the natural strength in his soul. His self doubt subsided, if barely, allowing Donal to think beyond his injury and to the task ahead. Like most

young men his age, he'd heard rumors and legends of the Witch Queen of Calad Reach. Some claimed she was a demon sent to plague mankind. Others believed her a ghost, forever doomed to wander the cold places of the world until the gods released her. Donal didn't know and never had reason to care. At least until now. The more he thought of it, and what the Administrator of Mistwell said, the more he began to wonder how much was legend and how much was truth.

The landscape gradually changed. Gone were the green hills and pleasant flowers. The hills became barren. Dull brown and grey stones peppered the land for as far as the eye could see. Scrub-brush littered the harsh slopes and ravines. More than one set of half-buried bones protruded from the path Songbird led them down. High in the sky, the sun ducked behind thick, black clouds that didn't move. An unnatural shadow fell across the world. They had come to the edge of the Witch Queen's territory.

Songbird reined in her roan mare, her bright eyes furrowed with worry. Her golden glow seemed paler. As if the magic of Calad Reach slowly seeped into her essence. When she spoke sadness laden her voice. "This is as far as I can take you."

Quinlan pulled up beside her. "I understand. In truth I doubt you'd be much assistance inside the Reach. I don't know what we're about to discover, but I doubt any of it will be pleasant."

"It is far worse than you know, Brother Quinlan," she said, her tone tense, hurried. "Creatures guard her lands. They are made of stone and filled with centuries of rage and hate. Many of my kin have lost their lives confronting such beasts. If you come across them before they see you, and they surely will, flee. Do not stop to look back. Doing so will only end with your unfortunate demise. I wish…I wish I could be of more assistance."

"You have been more of a blessing than you can imagine, Songbird," Quinlan said with heartfelt gratitude. "I shall miss hearing your voice inside the Reach. Perhaps one day we shall meet again, in pleasanter circumstances."

Her smile brightened her face with an otherworldly glow "I'd like that very much. It has been an honor."

"Thank you, Songbird," Quinlan told her and rode on into the perpetual near darkness of Calad Reach.

VII.

Not even the thick cloak of his appointment kept the chill from seeping into Quinlan's bones. He shivered despite years of conditioning on the walls of Andrak. Frowning, he rode on into an increasingly dire landscape. The terrain became mountainous. Jagged teeth of stone stabbed skyward. Loose stone tumbled down the harsh slopes, yet each time Quinlan gazed up he saw nothing. He couldn't shake the sensation of being watched, but without proof he could only go on. If the creatures Songbird was so afraid of did exist Quinlan would have to deal with them on their terms.

"Keep a sharp eye, young Donal," Quinlan warned. "We are being hunted."

Donal quietly mouthed a prayer. He'd survived the Omegri and the wraith attack, but this was unlike any other experience and potentially more dangerous. All of his childhood dreams of becoming a valiant knight evaporated around the cold reality he found himself thrust into.

"Yes, Brother," he said shakily.

Quinlan's horse jerked to a halt suddenly, snorting nervousness. A moment later the ground in front exploded in a shower of dirt and stone. A second explosion behind sent Donal's horse bucking. He fell to the ground before an oppressive shadow loomed over him. Quinlan drew his sword while slipping his shield over his right arm. The large silver cross flared to life with dazzling brightness. The shadows retreated.

"On your feet, Donal Sawq! Fear no darkness!" Quinlan roared the war priest mantra and wheeled to meet the threat.

A third and then fourth explosion brought more of the stone creatures to the surface. Then more. The air choked with ancient dust. More than a dozen of the massive creatures surrounded the war priest. Quinlan struggled to understand what confronted him, never having dreamed of such things. He waited, knowing there was nothing else to do until they decided to attack. He didn't wait long.

The first creature lumbered towards him with massive fists raised. Quinlan braced for the blow and moved his shield to block. The stone fist struck his shield and exploded. Blinding light and an odd acrid smell were

all that remained of the stone creature. Quinlan was thrown from his saddle, his sword skittering away on impact. The war priest struck the back of his head and went unconscious.

Donal rolled away from the sudden stampede as the rest of the creatures rushed in. He looked over to Quinlan but could do nothing. The war priest was knocked out and of little help. Reaching for his own sword, Donal tried to rise. A massive stone hand circled around his waist and lifted him from the ground like a rag doll.

VIII.

"Where are we?" Quinlan asked as he regained consciousness. His head felt like a giant was pounding a hammer on it.

Donal looked at his mentor. "I can't tell. We were taken into a tunnel in the mountains and brought to a large, old chamber."

"This room is far more than a mere chamber, imp," a harsh woman's voice grated. "You are in my audience room. Be thankful you still draw breath. It has been a very long time since a war priest was last foolish enough to enter my lands."

"The Witch Queen," Quinlan hissed.

She mocked him with laughter. "Witch Queen! How feeble minded the rest of you are. If you knew the truth of my existence you would not think to demean me with such a simple term. I am so much more than you can possibly imagine."

Quinlan, surprised to discover he wasn't bound, struggled to gain his feet. His legs felt rubbery. Stars swam through his vision. "Perhaps child thief is more appropriate."

"Is that what you believe?" asked the Witch Queen. The bitterness had left her tone, replaced by…dismay? "Why have you come to Calad Reach?"

"I am here for Prince Armas of Tolchas." The resolution in his tone left no room for error in either of their thoughts. "Return him to me, and we shall depart at once."

The Witch Queen laughed again. The acoustics of the partially open chamber drove each tone into Quinlan's brain like sonic nails. Roaring flares blazed in golden braziers scattered randomly throughout the

otherwise dark chamber. Snakes slithered about. The Witch Queen stood at the base of a small flight of stone stairs. Her black hair was wild, unkempt. Her eyes were narrow and blood red. Pale skin all but glowed in the near dark. She wore a pale black dress. Sleeveless, it draped down her slender body ending in two slits at her hips. Painfully thin legs stood braced shoulder width apart. She had the poise of an adder waiting to strike.

“I saved those children from the doom approaching,” she replied.

Quinlan tensed. Doom? The Omegri attacked relentlessly. Each day they attempted to overrun the last of the war priest castles in order to return darkness to the world. This doom felt different, as if the war priests weren’t aware of it. He couldn’t help but ask, “What doom? We defend the Free Lands from the Omegri. The only other substantial danger lies in you, witch!”

“Did you truly think to enrage me into acting foolishly?” she teased. “I have lived for centuries, Quinlan of the war priests. There is nothing you can say capable of enraging me. For all of your petty nuances you will find my will is quite resolute.”

Quinlan held out his hands. “Very well, what doom do you refer to? The Lord General knows nothing of what you speak.”

“So rash. So blind to the truth in the world,” the Witch Queen hissed. “The Omegri are but one facet of darkness at work in the world. What comes has no name. No description. A purge will sweep across the Free Lands, killing every ruler and his house. Not even your vaunted castle Andrak will remain safe during this coming darkness. Evil will flourish as good withers. Tell me, what will you do when the endless trains of new recruits to stand your walls during the Burning Season stop coming?”

“There is no such evil at work. The Lord General would know of it.” His words sounded hollow even as he spoke them.

“Would he?” she asked. “Think of the Purifying Flame. It weakens daily. Already the Omegri have managed to subvert members of your own order. They could not have done this without the influence of evil heading towards us.”

A pair of stone creatures stirred in the shadows behind her, drawing his attention. She arched an eyebrow. “Do you approve of my pets? The golems are absolutely loyal to me. Mindless and subservient to my desires.”

“You hide behind stone and threats to justify your abductions of children,” Quinlan accused. His mind raced to think of a path through the hedges of her mind.

“What justification would you require? I took those children to keep them safe within Calad Reach. Their fathers cannot protect them. No amount of force or strength of arms can do what my magic can.”

It was Quinlan’s turn to attack. “You think Calad Reach is safe from the all-encompassing doom you preach on me? I think you overestimate your powers.”

“Perhaps another demonstration is in order?” she mused. Both golems took a step forward. “Very well. Convince me to return the children, and it will be so. Fail and your squire will serve me through eternity.”

Quinlan froze. He’d come to Calad Reach expecting a battle, not dueling wits with a woman as ancient as Maximo Rosca. He hesitated, hoping not to fall into another trap. The war priest emptied his mind and took a calming breath. “What right have you to claim the lives of children? No being claiming to care would willfully steal a child from his mother. Are you so vain as to pass judgment on the lives of men?”

She folded her lithe arms across her chest, patiently waiting.

Quinlan continued, “The war priests defend all life from darkness. All life. Including yours. We are the servants of the Free Lands, not its keepers. All men are free to make their own decisions. If we gave in to the temptation to play god we would fall into shadow and rot from within. You claim a terrible doom approaches, and, I rightly believe, have acted according to your best judgments, but that doesn’t give you the right to make decisions for kings or nobles. Kingdoms ready to war against each other under the cloud of suspicion your actions have raised. How long do you think it will last before they turn their attentions, and armies, here?”

She stiffened just enough to embolden him further.

“War will consume the Free Lands, leaving it open to your great doom. Even should you survive you will spend eternity wallowing in the grief of knowing it was you who caused the end of all things,” Quinlan finished. “Is your conscience so clear that you can live with that?”

The Witch Queen looked from Quinlan to Donal before shifting to her golem defenders. Tension filled the chamber. Quinlan held his breath,

dreading her decision. He couldn’t imagine being a servant to the dark witch of Calad Reach. What horrors would he be forced to endure?

Finally she unfolded her arms and clapped once. “You might be a worthy opponent, Brother Quinlan. You would let these children go home and face certain death?”

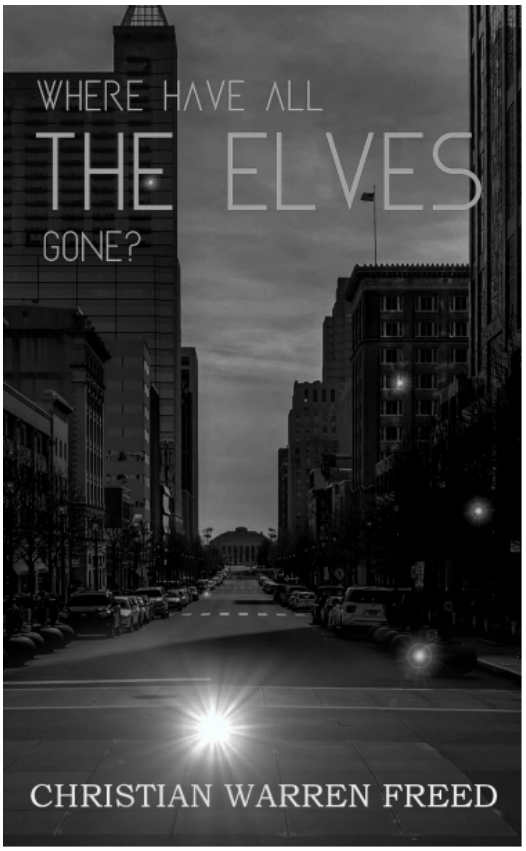
“I would give them the right to choose. What are we without free will?”

“Indeed. Take the children, war priest, but know this. Doom approaches and their deaths, inevitable as they are, will be on your conscience for the rest of your days.” She paused. “Can you live with that?”

They were back on the road by midday, accompanied by a wagon filled with tired, but otherwise, happy children. Donal spoke with them and laughed. Only Quinlan remained taciturn. The Witch Queen of Calad Reach’s last words haunting his thoughts. Could he live knowing he was responsible for so many innocent deaths? He didn’t know.

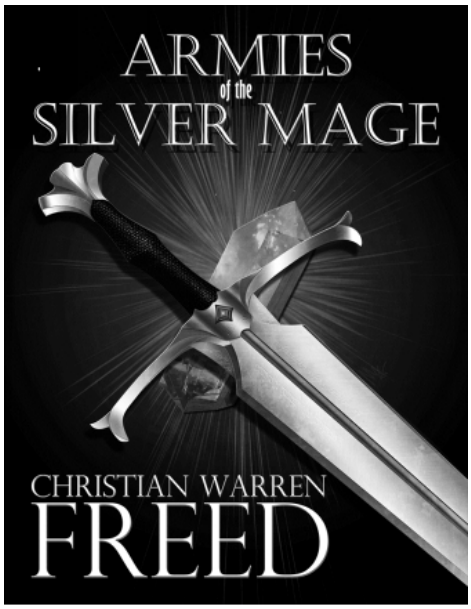
END

OTHER BOOKS BY CHRISTIAN WARREN FREED



Everyone knows Elves don’t exist. Or do they? Daniel Thomas spent years making a career of turning his imagination into the reality of bestselling fantasy novels. But times are tough. No one wants to read about elves and dragons anymore. Daniel learns this firsthand when his agent flatly says no to his latest and, what he deems, to be greatest novel yet. Dissatisfied with the turn to zombies and vampire lovers, he takes his manuscript and heads out to confront his agent.

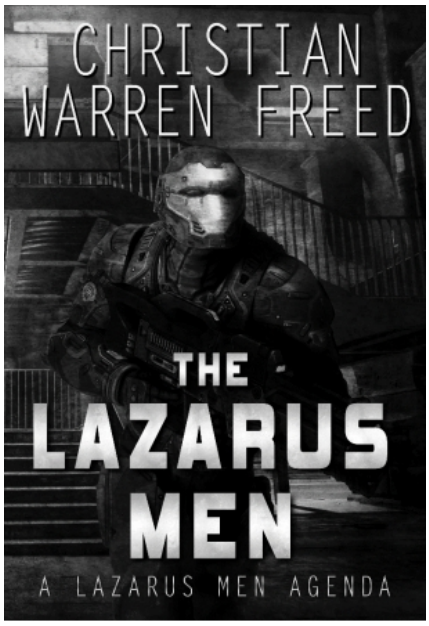
His world changes when he finds his agent dying on the floor of her office. Too late to help, he watches as her dead body disintegrates into a pile of ash and dust. Daniel doesn’t have time to ponder what just happened as a band of assassins breaks in, forcing him to flee to the Citadel and the home of the king of the high elves to survive. Daniel soon discovers that all the creatures he once thought he imagined actually exist and are living among us. His revelation comes at a price however, as he is drawn into a murder-mystery that will push him to the edge of sanity and show him things no human has witnessed in centuries.



Malweir was once governed by the order of Mages, bringers of peace and light. Centuries past and the lands prospered. But all was not well. Unknown to most, one mage desired power above all else. He turned his will to the banished Dark Gods and brought war to the free lands. Only a handful of mages survived the betrayal and the Silver Mage was left free to twist the darker races to his bidding. The only thing he needs to complete his plan and rule the world forever are the four shards of the crystal of Tol Shere.

Having spent most of their lives dreaming about leaving their sleepy village and travelling the world, Delin Kerny and Fennic Attleford never thought that one day they would be forced to flee their town to save their lives. Everything changes when they discover the fabled Star Silver sword and learn that there are some who want the weapon for themselves. Hunted by a ruthless mercenary, the boys run from Fel Darrins and are forced into the adventure they only dreamed about.

Ever ashamed of the horrors his kind let loose on the world the last mage, Dakeb, lives his life in shadows. The only thing keeping him alive is his quest to stop the Silver Mage from reassembling the crystal. His chance finally comes through the hearts and wills of Delin and Fennic. Dakeb bestows upon them the crystal shard, entrusting them with the one thing capable of restoring peace to Malweir.



It is the 23rd century. Humankind has reached the stars, building a tentative empire across a score of worlds. Earth's central government rules weakly as several worlds continue their efforts toward independence. Shadow organizations hide in the midst of the political infighting. Their manifestations of power and influence are beholden only to the highest bidder. The most powerful/insidious/secret of these, The Lazarus Men, has existed for decades, always working outside of morality's constraints. Led by the enigmatic Mr. Shine, their agents are hand selected from the worst humanity has to offer and available for the right price.

Gerald LaPlant lives an ordinary life on Old Earth. That life is thrown into turmoil on the night he stumbles upon the murder of what appears to be a street thief. Fleeing into the night, Gerald finds himself hunted by agents of Roland McMasters, an extremely powerful man dissatisfied with the current regime and with designs on ruling his own empire. To do so, McMasters needs the fabled Eye of Karakzaheim, a map leading to immeasurable wealth. Unknown to either man, Mr. Shine has deployed agents in search of the same artifact and will stop at nothing to obtain it.

Running for his life, Gerald quickly becomes embroiled in a conspiracy reaching deep into levels of government that he never imagined existed. His every move is hounded by McMasters' agents and the Lazarus Men. His adventures take him away from the relative safety of Old Earth across the stars and into the heart of McMasters' fledgling empire. The future of the Earth Alliance at stake. If Gerald has any hope of surviving and helping save the alliance he must rely on his wits and awakened instincts while foregoing the one thing that could get him killed more quickly than the rest: trust.

BIO

Christian W. Freed was born in Buffalo, N.Y. more years ago than he would like to remember. After spending more than 20 years in the active duty US Army he has turned his talents to writing. Since retiring, he has gone on to publish 17 military fantasy and science fiction novels, as well as his memoirs from his time in Iraq and Afghanistan. His first published book has been the #1 free book on Kindle 4 times and he holds a fancy certificate from the L Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Contest.

Passionate about history, he combines his knowledge of the past with modern military tactics to create an engaging, quasi-realistic world for the readers. He graduated from Campbell University with a degree in history and is pursuing a Masters of Arts degree in Military History from Norwich University. He currently lives outside of Raleigh, N.C. and devotes his time to writing, his family, and their two Bernese Mountain Dogs. If you drive by you might just find him on the porch with a cigar in one hand and a pen in the other. You can find out more about his work by clicking on any one of the social media icons listed below. You can find out more about his work by following him:

https://www.facebook.com/ChristianFreed or @ChristianWFreed.

Like what you read? Let him know with an email or review. christianwfreed@gmail.com